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## Role of Faulty Instructional Methods in Libyan EFL Learners' Speaking Difficulties

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### Abstract

A body of research indicates that Arab EFL learners are incompetent in oral communication. This has been the case of the Libyan EFL learners who encounter great difficulties in speaking skills. Despite spending years in learning English, and building good linguistic knowledge, they fail to employ that knowledge in real communicative situations. This might be the outcome of inadequate teaching approaches that are employed by Libyan EFL teachers. Their overreliance on traditional methods that emphasize extensive linguistic input rather than communicative output result in what Wolff (2010) calls 'mute English learners', who can only read and write but are unable to speak. This paper aimed to investigate the Libyan EFL learners' speaking difficulties and the factors underlying this problem. Total 125 students, from Sebha University, Libya participated in the study. Questionnaires and interviews were deployed for gathering data. The questionnaires and interviews were designed to elicit information about the participants' learning experience, the way they were taught English and speaking difficulties. Data were analysed using SPSS and content analysis. The study revealed that Libyan learners face difficulties in oral communication due to linguistic and psychological barriers. The results also showed that insufficient exposure to the target language and frequent use of Arabic, inside and outside the classroom, were the main factors contributing to the Libyan EFL learners' speaking difficulties. Lack of speaking activities and overemphasis on accuracy at the expense of fluency by the teachers were other contributing factors.

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**Keywords:** Speaking skills; speaking difficulties; instructional approaches; linguistic and psychological barriers

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## 1. Introduction

Achieving proficiency in oral communication skills has always been an aspiration for the majority of EFL learners in different EFL contexts. Teachers' efforts in having the learners study grammar, learn and memorize a lot of vocabulary do not seem to assist in that respect. It is widely acknowledged that the majority of EFL contexts are characterized by their formal environment of teaching and learning where "there is little or no opportunity for the learner to use the language in a natural communicative situation" (Ringbom, 1987, p. 27). As pointed out by Alhosni (2014), speaking skills and all related activities are totally overlooked in the classroom. Consequently, it becomes very difficult for the learners to make any progress and master that skill. This issue has recently been the concern for many researchers in the EFL context.

As regards the Libyan EFL context, it is notable that inside classrooms, there is an overemphasis on teaching grammatical structures and vocabulary out of contexts (at different educational levels) which results in ignorance of their application in communicative situations (Orafi, 2008). It is common to hear the learners say 'I understand English, but I can't speak it'. According to the UNESCO report (2002) and the Ministry of Education's survey (2004) on the Libyan learners' achievement in English, the students in the classrooms are generally passive-recipients of knowledge while teachers played the role of speakers. Based on these considerations, the researcher decided to look into speaking problems experienced by EFL Libyan learners with focus on instructional approaches applied by the teachers. The following research question was addressed:

1. What are the speaking problems experienced by EFL Libyan learners and how do teaching approaches that are used by teachers contribute to these problems?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Foreign Language Learning (FLL)

FLL refers to the situation in which the target "language is not spoken in the immediate environment of the learner" (Ringbom, 1987, p. 27). Yule (2006) indicates that the process of second language exposure is accomplished in a conscious, instructed and controlled manner. In this context, learners are exposed to a limited amount of the language which is fixed by classroom hours and lessons preparation. The typical environment of learning is merely classrooms with "very limited quantity of highly structured, selected and sequenced input" whereas interacting with teachers or other peers is rarely engendered (Ringbom, 1987, p. 27). Also, a high priority is given to writing whereas oral skills are disregarded. Therefore, there is no such effort to encourage learners to practice the language and be engaged in face-to-face interactions.

Furthermore, a failure in communication is not seen as a problem. Rather, heavily administered tests that focus on proficiency in linguistic competence are stimulated. The effectiveness of these tests is however temporary, as in the long run, the learners may not be able to conduct a simple conversation and express themselves effectively depending only on linguistic elements. Linguistic knowledge can only be used as a vehicle for producing meaningful language and facilitating the communication process (Yule, 2006, pp. 165-6).

Knowing a language involves more than knowing what form it takes, one needs to know how it functions too. Campbell and Wales (1970) clarified that to have a communicative competence, one should be able to "produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical, more important, appropriate to the context in which they are made" (p.247). Learning how language functions reflects the social aspect of interacting between people through language, and absence of interaction inside the classroom could cause obstacles in applying language structures into spoken discourse. Therefore, If elements such as exposure, opportunities to use the language are not sufficiently fulfilled, oral proficiency will not be achieved (Alhosni, 2014).

Dewey (1916, p. 38) stressed that learning is not supposed to be "an affair of telling and being told, but an active and constructive process". Learners need to put the hypothesis they have shaped about language into use. According to Littlewood (1981), only by way of participation and verbal actions can learners develop speaking.

However, Alhazmi (2006) reported that "language teaching in the Arab world is dominated by a traditional top-down, textbook-oriented, teacher led methodology" which produced non proficient students. Rababah (2003)

indicates that speaking difficulties encountered by Jordanian students, even the ones whose major is English, are attributed to an inconvenient environment of learning where traditional methods are still promoted.

Elabbar (2011) pointed out that the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is the most popular and accepted approach of teaching English in Libya. Libyan teachers "...think that pupils should be provided with large amounts of vocabulary and grammar rules to be memorized, and then they can start thinking of introducing various activities to practice the language" (AI-Buseifi, 2003 cited in Aldabbus, 2008, p. 7) . But learners may not be able to apply new vocabulary and structures if they just keep them in mind without actually try them out in a meaningful interaction.

In another study on Libyan teachers' practices of the English curriculum, Orafi (2008) reported that although the curriculum is designed on the basis of the communicative approach, teachers at secondary schools skip listening and speaking activities on the belief that such activities will waste their time giving the fact that the class is only 40-45 minutes maximum with a large number of students. Teachers are always under pressure to complete the curriculum in the time set by the ministry of education. Furthermore, they say that students' past experience at the preparatory stage was a key factor to omit oral activities because students are not used to doing them. Consequently, teachers find it difficult to have the students participate actively inside the classroom as they can only say few words or sentences. The teachers consider these activities beyond the students' abilities. They also believe that English is an academic subject that students will not use elsewhere.

In his comment on the EFL experience in China, Wang (2009, p. 151) argues " We have to confess our traditional EFL teaching has produced too many dumb and fluency idiots". Traditional instructional methods that focus exclusively on grammar accuracy, neglect learners' part in the learning process, and emphasize the use of L1 instead of the target language do not consider the students' communicative needs.

## 2.2. *Speaking Difficulties and Factors*

Although EFL situations place a great emphasis on reinforcing the learners' linguistic competence, among the speaking problems are grammar structures, limitations of vocabulary and wrong pronunciation (Foppoli, 2009).

Togatorop (2009) conducted a study on students' difficulties in speaking English, the results showed that due to their lack of vocabulary and limited command over grammar, students could not express themselves successfully. Similarly, Rababah (2003) suggests that Arab learners feel troubled when involved in communicative interactions because they have less vocabulary which makes them unable to further conversations.

According to Smith (2011), inadequate vocabulary not only can hamper speaking, but also understanding others, which leads to communication breakdown. One of the elements of comprehensible communication is clear and good pronunciation, otherwise the whole talk exchange will be hard to follow and that stands as a barrier for EFL learners (Dan, 2006). Moreover, EFL learners are hesitant to speak because of inability to pronounce some words, which is embarrassing for them. In his study on Saudi students' reluctance to speak, Hamouda (2012) found that 71.70% of them have pronunciation problems.

In addition to the linguistic difficulties, there are different affective variables that are involved in learning a new language where emotions such as fear and anxiety emerge and can therefore delay effective learning, particularly in communication.

Speaking places a great demands on students who believe that foreign language learners are judged by how good they are in speaking the language, and thus worry about performing in public. Juhana (2012) conducted a case study including 62 students at a senior high school in South Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia to investigate the psychological factors that hinder students from speaking in English classes. The results show that among the main obstacles that hamper adequate speaking, is anxiety, fear of making mistakes which is correlated with fear from being laughed at.

This is in agreement with Brown (2001) who argues that the greatest psychological barriers that lead to speaking reluctance are anxiety and shyness. Likewise, Meihua Liu (2007) in a case study in oral English classrooms in a Chinese university concluded that the moment when students give presentations in front of the whole class, is where they get the most anxious. As maintained by Horwitz and Horwitz (1986), in classrooms, learners who suffer from language anxiety exhibit an extreme fear when it comes to speaking and thus their communicative ability is affected

and may be regarded as less fluent than they really are. When being nervous and apprehensive, learners struggle in verbal production where they produce less words and unconnected sentences (Chen & Chang, 2004).

Mistakes can be another reason of apprehension because they make others aware of the limitations a student has, which is both discouraging and embarrassing when speaking the language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Hamouda (2012) found that the majority of participants in his study are reluctant to speak due to their fear of making mistakes, being laughed at, and fear of criticism of the teacher and frequent correction. Moreover, they are afraid of their classmates' comments on their performance.

Fear of negative evaluation is also a common problem faced by EFL learners which increases their anxiety when asked to speak. In an attempt to save face, especially when being corrected and given feedback by teachers for imperfect language use, EFL students may feel discomfort and stop speaking (Juhana, 2012). Yahya (2013) found that the participants in her survey responded that they would not hesitate in speaking the language if they knew they will not be negatively judged or interrupted for mistake correction.

Lack of confidence can be a further barrier for successful communication. He and Chen (2010) state that student's self evaluation for their speaking skills as imperfect leads to insecurity about communicating with others. When a person doubts that he/she does not possess a certain quality in whatever field, they become frustrated and shy away from doing any further effort to enhance it. "It is commonly understood that students' lack of confidence usually occurs when students realize that their conversation partners have not understood them or when they do not understand other speakers" (Juhana, 2012, p. 102).

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Participants*

The participants who took part in this study were 125 Libyan students at university level, aged between 18-35 years old and who have been studying English as a foreign language for about 5-12 years. They were randomly selected from different departments at the university of Sebha.

#### *3.2. Research instruments*

A Questionnaire and interviews were used as instruments for gathering data. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Each section included a number of item statements for assessing and exploring different aspects of the research concern including the participants' language learning experience starting from school to university, linguistic and psychological difficulties in speaking. All the statements were designed by the researcher except for measuring the psychological barriers; they were adopted from Hamouda (2012) and Yahya (2013). Interviews with 10 students were conducted with reference to the research question. The combination of two instruments offered the opportunity for elaboration, clarification, interpretation and confirmation of data.

### **4. Findings and discussion**

Data of the questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively by applying SPSS. Descriptive statistics were then presented and interpreted. Subsequently, analysis of the interviews was accomplished qualitatively "for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hseih & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

Table 1. descriptive statistics of the quantitative findings on the nature of the learning process inside EFL Libyan classrooms

Item statements	Yes	No
1. Grammar and vocabulary memorization are the main subjects	81.6	18.4
2. Teachers would translate vocabulary into Arabic	64.0	36.0
3. We would do more reading and writing than speaking	79.2	20.8
4. Teachers would explain lessons in Arabic	52.0	48.0
5. We would use Arabic more than English in the classroom	51.2	48.8
6. Teachers would speak more than I do	87.2	12.8
7. Teachers would not make speaking activities	69.6	30.4
8. I would not speak English with my classmates	82.4	17.6
9. Teachers would not encourage me to speak	44.8	55.2
10. Teachers would not give me opportunities to practise speaking	64.8	35.2

According to the overall responses given by the participants, the EFL Libyan environment is found to be of the main factors in inhibiting the students from speaking English successfully as shown in the above tables. The participants' response with a 'yes' on the statements 1 to 5 ranged between 51.2% and 81.6% which reveals that the students' learning experience is loaded with extensive knowledge on language forms more than functions as well as using Arabic as a medium of communication inside the class either by teachers or students.

Furthermore, with regard to speaking activities and opportunities given to the students to practise speaking, it is found that students are not given neither enough opportunities to speak English nor engaged in speaking activities that may enhance their speaking skills. These are represented by 64.8% to 69.6% respectively. Moreover, a great number of respondents (87.2%) reported that most of the talk is done by the teacher. However, 55.2% said that teachers encouraged them to speak whereas 44.8% denied this.

Table 2. Linguistic difficulties

An example of a column heading	Yes	NO
1. I do not have adequate amount of vocabulary	83.2	16.8
2. I am not sure of what vocabulary to use in a particular situation	75.2	24.8
3. I do not know enough grammar	72.8	27.2
4. I was not introduced to how to put grammar in use	54.4	45.6
5. I am unable to pronounce words correctly	36.0	64.0

According to the results, 83.2% of EFL Libyan learners agreed that they do not have a sufficient amount of vocabulary to use in speaking. Additionally, 75.2% are not certain about how to apply vocabulary to talk about particular situations. As regards grammar, a total of 72.8% do not know enough grammar to speak. More importantly, 54.4% said that they were not introduced how to use grammar in communicative situations while 45.6% responded with 'no' to this statement. It is noteworthy that 64.0% of the respondents do not have any difficulty with pronunciation whereas 36.0% had problems in this area.

Table 3. Psychological inhibitors

Item statements	Yes	No
1. I am afraid of making mistakes	76.8	23.2
2. My mistakes embarrass me and make me feel incompetent	76.0	24.0
3. I worry from the negative feedback I get from my teacher in the English class	72.0	28.0
4. I am worried about what opinion others might have when I speak English	60.8	39.2
5. I feel anxious every time I speak	80.8	19.2
6. While speaking English, I get nervous; I forget things I really know	75.2	24.8

A considerable number of students appear to be afraid of their mistakes (76.8%) and be embarrassed by them (76.0%). Fear of negative evaluation by teachers either in correction and giving feedback is experienced by 72.0% of the respondents. Besides, more than half of the participants (60.8%) have concerns about others' perceptions on their oral performance.

The findings also show that about 80.8% of EFL Libyan learners feel apprehensive when speaking. Also the feeling of nervousness reported by 75.2% of the participants made them unable to recall what to say, which hindered them from speaking properly.

The data obtained from the interviews revealed some interesting results with regard to speaking difficulties and how the learning environment and the style of teaching contributed to these difficulties. The findings show that at school and university, the students' experience was overloaded with reading comprehension, vocabulary memorization and grammar pattern while speaking skills were almost neglected, especially in the first stages of learning (preparatory school). As stated by one female student who studied English as a school subject "...teachers write vocabulary on the board, provide the translation, pronounce them and ask use to memorize". She added "we had no speaking class...I have been learning English for 7 years. After this time, I should know how to use the language, but you find students graduate from college and don't even know how to introduce themselves in English. Maybe 5% of them can". The students also indicated that English was regarded as an additional subject that is taught and learnt to pass exams and has no value.

This style of teaching was also reflected in the use of Arabic in the English classroom and less exposure to English. The students' first language was heavily used in the earliest stages of learning at school

through which lessons were introduced and explained. A male student mentioned that "most times teachers used Arabic at preparatory and secondary schools...This is wrong and affected use negatively at university as teachers use English and we don't understand". Students whose major is English criticized the use of Arabic although they said this was decreased at university. A female student argued "...we should use English...teachers mm..because we are Arabs we use Arabic. We think it is OK..they should encourage us to speak English"...when students see teachers use Arabic, they will do the same..this is what makes us weak in the language".

Additionally, difficulties in English brought about by poor speaking activities and opportunities. Those who did not specialize in English had never had speaking classes neither at school or university. As indicated by a male student "I don't remember teachers asked us to speak English...only teachers dictate, we listen". On the other hand, students whose major was English had speaking classes and activities except for preparatory school where they had none. However, they criticized the fact that conversations were memorized before performing them in front of the class. One student commented "we memorize dialogues and say them..this does not help, because if students want to discuss something they may not be able to do that as they are not prepared and they only say what they memorize". Furthermore, most of the participants blamed some teachers for not encouraging them to speak. In extreme situations, 95% of the class would keep quiet while only few students speak. A female student clarified this "...not all students participate..chances are not equal. For example, my class includes 30 students and only eight of us speak every time...the rest of us don't speak. I can't blame them, because teachers don't ask them to speak.. always the same faces".

Generally, classroom interaction was teacher-centered at all educational levels. Teachers seldom discussed topics with students. They would explain lessons and leave the class which decreased the students' opportunities to participate and practice speaking. The only opportunity the students had to use English was either to ask or answer questions and could not express themselves freely.

Interestingly, and in addition to the negative influence the educational experience had on the students' communicative competence, one student referred to the wider society where everyone speaks Arabic. He literally said "...because of the environment, even if we speak English inside the classroom, when we go outside, everyone speaks Arabic, it doesn't help".

Despite achieving linguistic knowledge, this aspect is still a speaking obstacle for students. All students pointed out that one of the main difficulties they face when speaking English is vocabulary because they usually reach the point where they cannot express themselves precisely and have to search for a synonym to keep the conversation going. As stated by a female student "the first thing when I start speaking. I look for suitable word that fits the situation I talk about. Vocabulary is a problem..mm..grammar..while speaking I think of grammar and how to make sentences..it holds me back". Noteworthy, one student mentioned that it is much easier to use grammatical



structures in writing than speaking. When they speak, they need more time to think of the right tense to apply which confuses them and makes speaking redundant.

Evaluative situations, making interruptions and corrections also led to hesitation in speaking. The situation where students are assessed is considered threatening and uncomfortable. "I prefer to receive feedback after I finish, but teachers interrupt while speaking...this is disappointing...I get confused..and stutter..teachers do not give me the opportunity to finish and organize my thoughts. What scares me the most is criticism if my grammar is incorrect".

Anxiety also hindered speaking. All the students who had speaking classes said that they feel apprehensive when performing in front of teachers and their classmates. As described by a male student "actually, stressed..I feel anxious a little bit I don't know why..it just makes me confused..sometimes my mind goes blank and forget words". Yet, the students also revealed that the feeling of nervousness may disappear after a while, but when given feedback while speaking they feel it again.

## 5. Conclusion

In view of the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that EFL Libyan teachers reconsider their style of teaching English. More attention should be given to elements of the communicative competence that require the engagement of students in the process of learning and that they be active agents in the classrooms. According to Rogers (1969) "effective learning is acquired through doing" (p.162). As far as speaking is concerned, it requires regular practices because it is a skill that can only be improved through performance. Moreover, EFL Libyan learners should be offered more opportunities to use the target language in a collaborative and cooperative manner by means of speaking activities to develop speaking skills. As the classroom represents the only place where the learners have contact with the target language, teachers should create a comfortable learning atmosphere which could lessen negative emotions such as anxiety and where students can express themselves more easily with no stress or fear.

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